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## THE VITALITY OF LITERARY HISTORY

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REV. HENRY RIEGEL  
Orleans, Mass.

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Within the halls of one of the lesser, though not inferior, American seats of learning, the Semitic Scholar, Ernest Renan, was once the object of smiling though adverse criticism for his vast presumption in essaying a *Life of Jesus*. "The habit some men have of turning in upon themselves, ruminating, then reversing the process, bringing forth from their inner consciousness a *Life of Jesus* is not conducive to very creditable biography." The quotation is from memory after a lapse of some years; but such was the drift of the criticism.

But if criticism ever went astray from the indistinct trails of psychologic processes that make for vitality, cogency, and power within intellectual and spiritual spheres, that criticism on Renan did. For creditable biography in this day, as in days of first disciples, does not consist of sifted data and recorded fact in an erected skeletonic "Life," but shall be an evidence that the personality of the biography has been taken into the consciousness of the biographer no matter how data are confused, order of events interrupted, and the events themselves transmuted in the glow of that finest passion of idealization, never wholly free from racial thought-modes and provincial forms of expression. To merit the approval of a "Life" it needs come forth a thing of energy from the seat of the will, vitalized by the fruitful powers of the imagination.

It is not the privilege of anyone to reproduce even an approximately accurate narrative of the career of Jesus. That was not a privilege of immediate disciples since the impact of his personality was of too profound a nature to manifest itself immediately in literary activities. The time factor is important in all history: it assures that necessary measure of retrospection in which the flat field of confused incident and emotion before which men stand blind dissolves into orderly perspective in which sequence and values are apparent. Biographies are certainly not the result of scientific processes that make pretense to

accuracy. The common groundwork of sympathy necessary to an ordinary narrative is deflecting and warping. Yet none other than a lover of the man may tell us of him, so strong is the mind's demand for a living transcription that has to do with essences of personality. Bias and false judgment are easily forgiven; but academic barrenness merits the oblivion that fate decrees for it. To the degree of the scholar's success in achieving accuracy may be attributed his many failures to establish cogently to the reader's perceptions the force and charm of the personality he is portraying. Eliminate the devotee's veneration, and a compilation of events ensues; but it lacks the essence of a "Life"—a something seen through the perceptions of another, for life must touch life before life may result.

Compilations, however accurate and exhausting, are to be read as Sanborn's *John Brown* needs be read. The reader is compelled by the accumulating litter of common-place to send out his finest perceptions for the soul of John Brown; to recover it by intuition or by inference. You get impatient for a glimpse of the man behind all this farming and wool-dealing. Thoreau, though acrid and invidious in his modes of comparison, gave magnitude to the force in the man that urged him to deeds too great to be petty and too unwise to be aught else than the product of deathless dreams. Brown's death advertised to Thoreau that there is such a fact as death—the possibility of a man dying.

It seems as if no man had ever died in America before; for in order to die you must first have lived. I don't believe in the hearses and funerals they have had. There was no death in the case, because there had been no life; they merely rotted or sloughed off as they rotted or sloughed along. No temple veil was rent, only a hole dug somewhere.

Invidious the comparison, indeed! But here by indirection Thoreau uncovers a Herculean energy of will that death by its fatality startles into life. Sanborn's personal regard for John Brown was more intimate than that of Thoreau. But Sanborn was a collector of material and an academic compiler with an undue regard for petty detail that buried the man and revealed only the farmer. Thoreau was after the man, and found him in his own consciousness, not because he took Brown's personality into his consciousness but because John Brown was Henry Thoreau in no small degree. Hence the real

Brown, the magnitude of his Puritan and Spartan soul, is to be found in the comparatively brief essays in Thoreau's *Miscellanies*.

All that history signifies is not contained within the covers of the average textbook. Not even the sifting of data always uncovers the forces that break into events. A literary facility and a measure of political insight cause library shelves to be much littered. It is a rare mind that ruminates productively upon events, that feels the throb of social forces and economic ideals, that discerns the trend of given periods of civilization and the play upon, and directing of, time passions by great personalities. All this and much more is involved in the production of narrative that is dynamic and vital. It is absorption in consciousness of the above factors, and rebirth in adequate literary form that makes history. The events themselves are of less moment than their adequate interpretation.

The vast research and profound learning of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* do not in themselves explain the vitality of this history to the student. Gibbon's interpretation of the events that marked Christianity's accession to power is so pronouncedly opposed to current opinion that this in itself would suffice, it seems, to condemn it to the shades of oblivion. But it is just this presumption in him to differ that saves him from academic and ecclesiastical sterility. The healthy, romantic curiosity of the Gothic mind finds in this presumption, his analysis of events by the norm of political convergence, and his critical characterization of participants, its field of suggestion, its stimulus, and its sanity. His age tempered his interpretations. He is read for this evident temper of the intellectual life in which he lived and which he assisted to create as much as aught else. That enriches his contribution to the world's literature. However soon or late his interpretations may be proven true or false, he is vital by virtue of this essence of himself and the intellectual temper of his day he has fused with his work. Not an annalist with but a single ability, that of notation, is Gibbon. Other forces assisted to keep him vital to him who is not afraid.

It may be contended that this style of writing is not historic but philosophic; it uses events or a series of events for a display of talents that are not necessarily those of the pure annalist. Events thus

used are as drapery to exhibit the fine lines of an artistic figure. But the annalist at his best exercises a just discrimination in not ringing the changes on unimportant detail. In the days when history was poetry and folklore and was sung by bard and minstrel at court and castle, there was filth and obscenity and cowardice enough to celebrate. But valiancy of heart and strength of arm and love of native land were not only more pleasing to recite, but they were the virtues of endurance and productiveness in all the dreariness of primitive civilization. The poet-historian ruminated sufficiently to make selection, to epitomize the germane and characteristic, leaving very much unsung and unsaid that the scholiast might demand as necessary to a proper understanding of those barbaric days. Though incomplete and in a measure inaccurate, this early literature of folklore and poet-lore is vitality personified, and furnished much of the substance on which all later patriotisms and religions were reared.

The belying of facts and the distorting of images cannot be condoned in the writer of secular history. And no one of any culture is much deceived by an overweening preference on the part of the historian for this or that party in some national crisis. All are acquainted with the current criticism of Macauley's *History of England*. Macauley, however, is read, and, I venture to say, as much because of his bias and preferences as in spite of them. A perusal of Carlyle's *French Revolution* is a reading of Carlyle rather than a notation of occurrences of that social and political upheaval. Here is a Protean mind which reflects events for you. He is a forger of thunder himself; the lightning of such social impact is of the chemistry of his own mind. The bald facts of this political cataclysm are horrors without justification or relationships. But once let the play of adequate mental energies reduce this chaos to some order, and the shriek of its villanies is less gruesome and its several events and sequences assume place in a cosmic process that is orderly at least, behind the furies of swift-moving disasters. "God in history" is a myth until we collaborate with one who exercises vast powers of retrospection and introspection; who indeed turns in upon himself, ruminates, and then reverses the process. Disasters are illuminated by such survey with the wisdom that transfigures carnage and bloodshed. You may know something of the Revolution when you have

finished this item of your education, but you will know vastly more of the personality of Carlyle.

Various types of historians are necessary to successive levels of human culture. The clerk who unearths data and chronicles facts serves the classroom stage of education, and the need of praise which is his due cannot be withheld. Then follows the annalist of the order of the Venerable Bede whose recitation is touched with the charm of poetry. Another of a later date is the statesman-historian to whom court intrigues and political wars are as everything in the making of a nation. But in the prophet-mind, in whom literature, art, religion, and politics are epitomized and whose interpretative powers are appalled by nothing that transpires, lies real history. Events, literatures, and arts are fused in the chemic processes of his mind into substance-philosophy—like Taine who writes on literature and produces history; like Carlyle who writes history and the result is literature. History is the unfolding of a divine philosophy anyway; intelligence in the universe presupposes this. This movement of forces and tides of development challenges master minds, and the one who interprets out of his knowledge assisted by such powers as are personal to himself—intuitions, feelings for justice, sense-perception for the characteristic—is altogether vital and a truth-speaker, though accuracy in details may be sacrificed.

In the field of biography nothing better illustrates this than the Gospel of John. Let the controversy concerning its authorship rage! It matters not! The academician may insist that we have fact; it must either be or not be a production of the Beloved Disciple. The devotee is grieved that so characteristic a passage from a great soul as that of the adulterous woman should fall into discredit as an interpolation. The scholar may trace resemblances between its philosophy and that of the Philonian school, and that in turn run to earth in Plato. No matter! It yet remains the vital gospel because it is theologic and philosophic. It attempts to explain Jesus—to fit him into a preconception, a cosmogony already formulated. It is an interpretation of personality, and that means filtration through the opaque medium of another mind, which, however, moved in the finest philosophic speech of its day.

Here Jesus, even more than in the letters of Paul, is transfigured

(not disfigured) by the fact that he is the consciousness of the writer. He may lose something of historic reality but gains even by the questions that arise on this point, by the feeling that he was real to the inner sense of this Philonian mystic. Time is essential for the measuring of qualities of personality and that process of assimilation that re-embodies in cogent and living form. It hence matters little how late the critics set the date of its composition. The later the better, for the history of our own lives cannot be written until they are looked back upon from advanced years. The pen that gave this gospel form was virile with knowledge—self-knowledge—the kind of inner wisdom that much mental gestation emits. This writing is thus distinguished from the other gospels which are energized by faith—the blind faith of fishermen somewhat distinct from the profound insight of a man of culture.

The gospel writings are biographical but not autobiographical, ever something more than an array of incident that forms the milestones of a human career. The effort to bring a mighty soul within human reach and speech demands the subordination of the annalist's literary powers to the philosopher's insight. A soul—who shall say what it is? so sublimated are its essences, powers, and passions that defy analysis, and at most only the results of its manifestation remain a sensation in feeling or a treasure in memory. To be strictly accurate in limning such a nucleus of potentialities, disallowing all penetrations, is to invite biographical disaster. Events, time, and place are the primer on which the memory fattens itself. But the events of a notable career are always an after-thought: they are born of curiosity after the soul has passed on and the rustle of its wings is hushed. And being born of curiosity events are after all common-place and not infrequently destructive of that genuine contact which energizes the mind to new forms of activity. The letter of barren data kills the spirit of discerning insight.

The function of the clerk and scribe are here at discount. To tell an adequate story of Jesus we are less concerned with the day and hour of his birth than about the poetry that event elicited; for the poetry is the highest evidence of somebody's noblest powers in creative regency; somebody's love awakened to poetic retrospect in hymns of praise. This poetry will live when the date of his birth is forgotten.

Dates are nebulous and should be. If these gospels were designed for the salvation of men they were correctly written. They are the essence of varied psychic processes playing introspectively and retrospectively upon unorganized data, the center of which is a soul—a nucleus of ideals and altruistic passions wrapped about with mist. The force of such literature has ever been poetic and literary, charming the creative powers of imagination into the working-out of a type of ethical progress that is personal to the individual or the race. A Semitic dreamer has indeed been playing upon the fancy of heavier tempered races, not with a hard-and-fast formula of entrance into the kingdom of heaven, imposing a ready-made and unyielding salvation, but stimulating and teasing the heavy wit into finer musings on the eternal questions of life and death. Despite their barrenness of detail the gospel's orientalisms of imagery and modes of speech in terms of the supernatural are like the unconscious poetry of color and line and mass of motive flowing upward to mysteries draped in shadow and a glory not yet revealed. The salvation from nullity these gospels have been to the clayey mental substance of the European peasant when first they came to his hand, can never be estimated. This book was the primer of popular education; but the virtue of this education lay in its poetry and art that quickened a phlegmatic imagination that eventually created a medley of interpretations. But this variety indicates how effectively the wings of fancy were freed. And while the strife and wars of such freedom have been deplored, not to have had these powers of the mind impressed by a Semitic literature would have been yet more deplorable. The scholastic and academic in nowise qualified these productions.

The Renaissance has achieved the most distressing misconceptions of the poetry, phrased in terms of the supernatural, contained in these records. Its classicism and its pseudo-scientific spirit, have reduced this literature to a pitiable bone of contention as to the fact or fiction of its most luminous and suggestive incidents, and thus destroyed their possible motive to vaster achievements in art and religion. So that recent art impulse has turned aside from biblical sources for inspiration and found motive in mediaeval legend. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had every justification for its reversion to the days before Raphael for more serious ideals and types for artistic



speech than the present had to offer. Learning of the academic order had established its standards which could revel in the ponderous perfection of a Milton, but was deficient in mysticism of insight for values in poetry other than that of measured feet and polished rhyme. This type of learning would measure the quality of a work by the accuracy of the data there displayed, the true order of events adhered to, the consistency of doctrinal detail logically threading the whole into a fabric, rather than by that greater test of infinite suggestiveness of virile, potent charm that releases fertile mental and spiritual powers. All in religious literature cannot stand the test of "either fact or fiction." This rule does not hold in the art of revealing a great soul. The same classic temper elevates the canons of the Academy in determining the merits of an artist. If the artist is an academician in spirit, loving form for form's sake, judge him by that standard. If he have something to communicate, however, far beyond the concerns of mere technique, the canons of the Academy no longer obtain. The sodden mind that would contend for an absolute basis in history for the legends of the Holy Grail, of which Abbey's paintings are the dream-epics of truth certain as death itself, is as much justified in such position as the pseudo-scientist who would thrust the value of fact into a realm where fact has no value whatever. A strong statement that! but it is not beyond bounds. The chief event of marvel in the gospels—the resurrection—is not a matter of scientific analysis. It is literary in quality and belongs to the world of poetry and art. It is an impertinence for the apologist to attempt to prove its literalism in time and place; and no less than this for the skeptic to disprove its scientific accuracy. The mathematical faculty is in a sea of strange elements that compass and sextant hardly recognize. Point me to a religion that has not flowered into myth and legend, poetry and art, and there will you find the senility and impotency of age ere its youth has dawned.

Nothing attests the mystic virtues of Jesus as these elements of wonder that the post-Renaissant thinker, be he conservative or liberal, can so little abide. For the conservative literalist, insisting on the verity of these facts in history, loses his grip on the symbolic fact these things are in the soul of the writer. The critical rationalist, insisting on their conformity to scientific assumptions of cosmic pro-

cedures, dulls his wit to the force in the universe poetic, imaginative, and subjective inspirations ever have been, especially when epitomized in a personality. The son whose soul is alive with love for his mother lets his mind flower into beautiful fancies of her youth and reads into her life virtues that the unbiased observer might not find there. Nevertheless, these fancies are the symbols of a force in the mother who could create such love in the heart of a son a thousand-fold more valuable than any analytic résumé of her actual qualities. A great scientist has admitted his loss of appreciation for poetry by the persistent grooving of brain tissue with scientific formulae. The classicist clamoring for facts and certainty has done the same thing. The portrayal of a master soul is possible only as that master abides in the consciousness, more real there than in the environs of time and circumstance. The more secure his seat there, the more certain his partial fusing with other elements in that faculty—preconceptions, the colorings or shadings of national or racial peculiarities; but the more time-enduring and vital the transcription.

Jesus' power was fluid: it transfused itself in the imagination of the believer, and, according to the greatest psychological laws, imposed no hard and fixed type of eternal life, but gave to individual initiative the largest and most efficient scope. These men of his day, and those near to his day, played retrospectively and introspectively upon him; and from this mental gestation emerged the fragments of a life that is all vitality and not by virtue of its accuracy, but by virtue of the existence in consciousness of his personality with those who wrote of him.